In this richly detailed work, Jordan Sand examines the historicization of Tokyo, showing how a turn away from monumental spaces saw various groups attempt to seek meaning in the everyday of Tokyo’s past in the memories of residents or in the remains of the urban landscape. Covering the period from 1969 through to the early years of the twenty-first century, Sand examines debates about the meaning of the city and ideas of space to show how focus shifted from a public commons where citizenship could be enacted via demonstrations and other activities to smaller, more intimate attempts to use the history embedded within to reclaim the city. Places and objects formerly ignored or marginalized now held greater significance for a range of people whose efforts to preserve, and use, these traces of the past resulted in a heritage that was both marketable and accessible.

Paul Stangl has noted that recent literature in geography and the humanities uses such terms as “everyday,” “street,” and “public space” rather than J. B. Jackson’s “ordinary built environment” to “emphasize their role as milieus for social action and as loci of oppositional collective memory.”[1] While Sand does use these terms, and does consider the actions of people seeking to use the everyday city’s repository of memories and of the past as successful insurgencies (p. 144), he is evenhanded in showing that the vernacular landscape was equally available for official use with “a privatized everyday … given monumental form (p.110).

The book is structured into four main chapters which each feature a case study to explain how four different spaces—the public square, the neighborhood, the street, and the museum—were “sites for the mobilization of the vernacular past in Tokyo since the 1960s” (p. 23). Sand expands on these case studies and brings in a wealth of information and scholarly work to examine the debates and theoretical discussions surrounding space and access in Tokyo. The four case studies that Sand uses are different in a number of ways, but each serves to accomplish the goal of understanding how the past in Tokyo was used and why. The first chapter takes up the issue of access to monumental spaces and deals with the expulsion of protestors from such a space, namely the Shinjuku West Exit Plaza incident in 1969. The following case study concerns the creation of a community via local activism while the third deals with the activities of a group of scholars and artists who sought to record the remains of the city. The final case study examines museum exhibits of everyday life and takes up the case of the Edo-Tokyo Museum.

In each chapter, Sand analyzes the case study in great detail and then expands outward from it. Prior to engaging with these themes, however, Sand contextualizes the various developments—political, social, and cultural—which affected the urban landscape of Tokyo, explaining how a multitude of factors, including prime ministerial announcements, cultural change, and the hollowing out of industry, all served to create the conditions for an environment which could make use of the past. This is a concise, clear, and focused account explaining how Tokyo’s landscape developed during this time. This section is not only relevant to the whole work, but an interesting explanation for how the urban landscape of Tokyo developed during the latter half of the twentieth century, and sets the scene to explain why some areas of the city became available for historicization.
Throughout each of the case studies and the discussion thereof, Sand examines how the past was mobilized in relation to different issues of social space and the everyday. To examine each case study and its attendant issues, Sand maps out the various theorizations and conceptualizations of specialists and practitioners to show how spaces from the city’s past were understood and traces the antecedents of the movements and ideas. In order to better understand what context they were taking place in, he also analyzes these debates with regards to other theoretical understandings, referencing, for instance, thinkers such as Henri Lefebvre and John Locke, or sites elsewhere such as museums in other countries. He also takes into account how these activities were interpreted in the media and elsewhere. In chapter 3, “Deviant Properties: Street Observation Studies,” for instance, which takes up the efforts of a diverse group of intellectuals and artists to document the vestiges of the past found in the street, the “overlooked, unvalued and seemingly insignificant things” (p. 88), Sand analyzes these activities in comparison with the actions of avant-garde French intellectuals in the 1950s, contrasting the motivations and guiding principles of the two movements. With regards to this aspect, Sand’s work provides a comprehensive overview of the various debates surrounding the use of and access to space in Tokyo.

The only case study and chapter which seems somewhat less connected is chapter 1, “Hiroba: The Public Square and the Boundaries of the Commons.” Unlike the others, this chapter does not appear to deal with the mobilization of the past; instead, the focus is on the failure of radical politics and the transformation in the idea of public space. Sand utilizes the case of the evacuation of Shinjuku West Exit Plaza in 1969 to show how understandings of access and of citizenship were no longer valid, forcing citizens to locate new sites on which to focus their interests. It is this turn which Sand sees as important because it resulted in a change, away from monumental spaces to seeking meaning and claiming the small intimate spaces of the city, the marginal places, which he takes up in the rest of the work. It is not only concepts of space and this turn, however, which tie this chapter to the others; the final chapter also bookends this development with a turn back to monumentalism, and a symbolic “ending to the period of experiments in using Tokyo’s past to claim the city as the property of its citizens” (p. 110). The work, then, is extremely well structured with a number of themes that tie the chapters together. In addition to “issues of urban property and the basis of claims that residents make to it,” locality, preservationism, citizen politics, corporate capitalism, consumerism, and gender are also addressed (p. 24). These themes arise in each of the chapters in different ways and Sand ensures that the connections are clearly drawn.

The work has a number of strengths, not the least of which is Sand’s command of both his materials and his topic. The chapters are tightly focused and the level of detail and analysis is excellent. Indeed, the small details that Sand uses to explain some elements are one of the joys of this work. In one case, for example, the explanation of property values and land speculation in the introduction are revisited in chapter 4 to explain the funding model of the Edo-Tokyo museum. This attention to detail is also present in the notes section, which provides a wealth of information on various topics raised and points out how to explore further. This section can almost be read by itself, but while most of the information would impede the flow of the work, some information could have been included in the text without breaking the flow. The name of a waitress made famous, Kasamori Osen, is one example where inclusion would benefit the work (pp. 180–183).

This work is of interest to scholars of urbanism and history given that it deals with issues of space, access, the vernacular landscape of a city, and how people mobilize the past. It has equal value for those outside the academy as many of the issues that Sand examines continue to be of concern elsewhere, and may become more prevalent in the coming years. For activists and citizens who have an interest in urban issues and even just for residents or visitors to Tokyo, there is a great deal to study in this work. For this author, having lived in two of the areas that formed the subject of the community activism in the second chapter, “Yanesen: Writing Local Community,” Sand’s book was informative on a personal level, showing another side to what appeared to be a familiar area, but the way in which museums utilize the past to create a history of the everyday and the actions of intellectuals to document the eccentric vestiges of the past can help many residents and tourists to reconsider Tokyo the city itself in new and different ways.

While extremely detailed and well written, this work does have one flaw in that it leaves one with a Dickensian covetousness for more and a wish that Sand could expand the focus to other cities within Japan. Did they differ in the ways that their citizens sought to reclaim the past, and if so, how? Did Osaka not see any similar intellectual movements to document its past? In fact, with some of the case studies being unique in nature, questions arise...
as to why all other areas did not see similar occurrences, with the area of Minami-Senju a notable exception. This desire for more arises also because although the concise nature of the work is one of its advantages, it equally constrains it, and the book would benefit from more illustrations. The Street Observation chapter in particular would benefit from more photographs to aid readers unfamiliar with either this movement or with the fragmentary nature of Tokyo to understand the focus of their activities. This inclusion would help the more general reader and would aid in understanding other illustrations such as the map of Street Observation "Properties" (p. 94). Other illustrations which could be included are ward maps to show the difference in definitions of community, but these are the most minor of quibbles and should not detract in any way from an excellent piece of scholarship that is an easily accessible and intellectually stimulating work that should appear in libraries on urban studies, on history, on Tokyo, and on Japan.

Note


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